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Mechanics' Institutes: Glorious Failures or Modest Successes?

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Abstract: Mechanics Institutes or, as they are more commonly known in the State of New South Wales, Schools of Arts are often portrayed as having been glorious failures in that they did not achieve their founding purpose. They did not educate the artisan in science and technology. This paper partially disputes that point of view. It argues that, in Australia, the so-called second wave of Schools were really quite successful in achieving their much more modest goals. They adapted the overstated idealism of the early Schools to meet the real needs of their local communities. These later Schools provided a local home for reading, learning, culture, civil society, and recreation in the then developing suburbs and towns of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Schools of Arts, as multipurpose centres of adult learning and activity, eventually declined as their communities grew and diversified. Their earlier comprehensive functions were taken over by a range of more specialised providers and facilities.

Introduction

Schools of Arts are everywhere in Australia. Indeed, there were many more Schools of Arts in Australia than in Great Britain at their relative peaks of operation (in the thousands as opposed to the hundreds). Why was this the case? Moreover, why is such a widespread educational phenomenon so often described as a glorious failure? The major thrust of this paper is that there was a distinct Australian variant of the ideal type School of Arts. Further, it is claimed that this variant provided a local home for reading, learning, culture, civil life, and recreation in the then developing Australian towns and suburbs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These claims are explored in the context of one suburban region of the greater Sydney metropolitan area, to the south of the central business district, the suburbs of the St. George District and Sutherland Shire.

Schools of Arts: Glorious Failures

Writers of the Story of adult education in Australia often cast Schools of Arts in the role of glorious failure. Such writers are usually operating from within a tradition (the so called "great tradition") that sees the Story of Australian adult education as merely a continuation of mainstream British adult education. According to Laurent (1994), the beginning of the failure thesis can be traced back to 1851 and James Hudson's seminal *History of Adult Education*, which claimed that the British Schools of Arts had failed to achieve their Stated purposes. They had not educated the mechanic in the scientific principles underlying his trade. They had not succeeded in promoting the mental and moral improvement of the working classes. Some Australian writers tend to repeat simplemindedly this longstanding position of many British historians of adult education and to claim the Australian Schools also failed gloriously (Laurent, 1990). In Nadel's

(1957) Study of Australian colonial culture, the penultimate chapter dealing with the Schools of Arts is headed "Failure." Even Whitelock (1974), whose account is generally quite balanced, closes his discussion on the Schools under the heading "Decline and Fall." While Serle (1987) concludes his discussion on the Schools as follows, "within a few years of their foundation, the purely recreational element came to dominate, the classes dwindled away and, while the libraries remained useful . . . the halls became meeting places and dance and billiard rooms" (p 24).

Schools of Arts: Modest Successes

Some other authors—Candy (1994), Laurent (1990, 1994), Morris (1992), Warburton (1963), Whitelock (1974), and Wesson (1972)—argue that the Australian experience of Schools of Arts, and, indeed, of adult education in general, has been much different to that of the British. The School of Arts movement may well have been one of the most successful examples of British educational imperialism. The Schools spread throughout the English-speaking world very quickly. The impulse for greater rationality, the passion for science, the desire for moral improvement, and the thirst for useful knowledge turned out to be as powerful in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA as they were in Great Britain. But, while Schools of Arts the world over had much in common they were obviously shaped by their local socio cultural environment.

The Australia of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a much different country to that of early Victorian Britain. It was a much more democratic country, some would say the most democratic country in the world. It had probably the highest Standard of living for working people in the world. It was a comparatively collectivist society, the home of mateship and not rugged individualism. It was a place where the government took a leading role in providing economic and social infrastructure. It was more Irish, Scottish, and Welsh and less English. There were more nonconforming protestants and fewer Anglicans, and, of course, many more Catholics. It was a place of Strong Labor parties and powerful trade unions. The first Labor governments in the world were elected here and by the First World War, Australia had the highest trade union density in the world (Morris, 1991). And perhaps most importantly, Australians were, as Sir Henry Parkes (as cited in Whitelock, 1973) liked to say, "a practical people and have little affection for the ideal and the imaginative; and we are rather proud of this deficit in our national character" (p. 129).

The Schools were glorious failures if, in line with the prevailing view of British scholars, the focus is on formal Statements of goals and purposes and the imperative of reforming the moral depravity of the working man. Then the Australian Schools' billiard tables, libraries of popular fiction, light entertainment, lowbrow lectures and regular dances can be seen as blatant examples of this tragic failure. But, noting Parkes' comment on the role of the practical in the Australian psyche, the Schools can be seen as successful in that they were able to adapt the confused idealism of the Movement's founders to meet the real needs of their local communities. In so doing, they created some thousands of multipurpose adult education and recreational centres across the nation.

Schools of Arts: A Distinct Australian Model

The southern Sydney suburban Schools of Arts were built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and well illustrate the view that there was a distinct and different "second wave" of Schools of Arts (Warburton, 1963, p. 79). Moreover, this second wave played an exceptionally important role in the development of the Australian society and its local

communities. By the time of the spread of the suburban Schools of Arts, there was, it could be argued, an Australian prototype School of Arts. This School of Arts had little to do with the scientific/technological education of the artisan class. It, however, had a lot to do with providing, in these then new suburbs, a local home, no matter how modest, for reading, learning, culture, civic action, recreation, and entertainment. Further, these Schools' provided a social focus to the lives of the inhabitants of these new suburbs. A focus sorely needed, given the almost complete absence of any other local social infrastructure.

The St. George and Sutherland Experience

Socio Cultural Background

As the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century began, there was, in Sydney, a shift of population from the rows of rented inner city terrace houses to the new owner occupied detached cottages of the suburbs spreading along the newly developed rail and tram lines. Who were these new suburbanites? They were members of the lower middle classes and the more secure members of the working classes (largely tradespersons and / or government employees). It was people such as these, who made up the bulk of the orderly, loyal, respectable, churchgoing, home loving, largely protestant population of the St. George District and the Sutherland Shire. The burning political issue of the day, locally, was temperance. In 1907, the principle of local option had been introduced and in 1916 the early closing of hotel bars had been adopted by referendum. The overwhelming mood of these new suburbs seems to have been anti liquor. To take but one example, in all the suburbs of the Sutherland Shire there were but five bars, while the small inner city neighbourhood of Glebe had almost 20. It was widely believed at time that to be successful, a local politician had to be a protestant, a churchgoer, a mason, and an advocate of temperance.

The Beginnings of the Schools

In almost all of these new suburbs, there was soon built a School of Arts. Of course the then current New South Wales (NSW) policy that provided for a government grant to help with the construction of such a facility greatly assisted this process. The records of many of these Schools are far from complete. However, the one event, in their lives, that is very well documented, in almost all cases, is the ceremony at which the School was officially opened. From the reports of these opening ceremonies it can be seen just how significant these events were in the lives of their communities. The NSW Premier was often in attendance, sometimes the Governor as well or instead of the Premier, usually the Minister for Education, local protestant clergy, and always the local Mayor and Aldermen. Sir Joseph Carruthers, solicitor, Member of the Legislative Assembly and, later, Member of the Legislative Council, Premier of NSW (1904-1907), was the most prominent local politician, a great supporter of the School of Arts Movement, and as such he presided at many opening ceremonies. While opening the Miranda School of Arts, in 1904, he made his famous pro billiards speech. In this speech he stressed the importance of recreation as well as education in the operations of the successful School of Arts and the wider life of the community. Towards that end, he advocated the addition of a billiards room. This would not only provide a local facility for healthy recreation but was also the best means, he claimed, to raise painlessly the necessary monies to fund the library and the School's other educational tasks.

An Educational Role

While the overtly educational role of these suburban Schools of Arts is not stressed in accounts of their operations, many of them did play very significant and varied roles in the educational development of their communities. In their early days, many of the Schools of Arts provided very useful and successful evening school classes for adults often taught by the local public school master. Being the first built local public building many served, during the day, as the classroom for the local Public School until a permanent school building could be erected. To relieve overcrowding, some were used at various times as an annex to the local technical college and high school while numerous Schools let their halls to various community or privately operated kindergartens and preschool groups. On smaller scale, over the years various community groups and private operators rented the Schools' halls and classrooms for educational purposes for both children and adults. A partial listing of such educational activities would include business education, migrant English, the full range of dance classes, adult basic education, elocution, piano and other musical instruments, and drama.

Libraries

More obvious and more visible was the role of the School in providing library services. The Municipalities Act of 1867 had provided for government grants to municipalities for the purchase of books for free public libraries. However, not all municipalities founded such libraries and not all of those that did, managed to maintain their public libraries. All the Schools, to some greater or lesser extent, maintained a lending library and reading room. The library became such an important component of the Schools' lives that many rebadged themselves, in the early 1900s, as Literary Institutes. Books were swapped with other Schools to meet the growing demand for "new" titles and popular authors. Later the State Library provided regular bulk loans to the Schools. This provision of "public" library services continued in some areas until comparatively recent times. The decline of most Schools was compounded by the difficulties faced by their libraries in competing with the new Municipal Libraries established following the adoption of the Public Libraries Act.

Meetings

All the Schools of Arts as built or extended had a range of class or meeting rooms in addition to the main lecture hall and library and reading room. These meeting rooms were soon in Strong demand from a range of local organizations and associations in order to hold their regular meetings. The full range of lodges, social clubs, political parties, women's groups, and community bodies used these facilities. The role of the lodges was so significant that many Schools maintained a special room solely for their use. Some Schools report having had in the peak years a lodge meeting booked for every weeknight of the year.

Religious Organizations

Not only were the Schools' premises used by secular bodies many churches held their services in the Schools' lecture halls while awaiting the completion of their own purpose built premises. At Oatley, the first local Anglican, Methodist, and Roman Catholic Church services were all held in the School of Arts hall. However, this traffic was not all one way. In 1898, the Miranda School of Arts was established on the initiative of the Miranda Progress Association. The School operated for a number of years, until its own building was completed, in rooms at the

rear of the local Congregational Church. The Committees of the School and the Progress Association shared many of the same personnel, most of whom were Congregationalists.

Theatrical Performances and Cinematic Presentations

Being the only public hall in the suburb meant the School's facilities were often in demand for amateur dramatics, professional performances, and cinematic presentations. The first locally screened movie films were shown in the Oatley School of Arts' hall. The Stage performances, at the then new School of Arts auditorium at Cronulla, had proved to be so popular, the local newspaper reported in October, 1913, that there was a fear that the walls would bulge out. Today, the premises of three of the area's Schools of Arts provide homes for significant community theatre activities: Rockdale, Sutherland, and Cronulla.

Civil Society

Civic functions and public meetings always played an important role in the activities of the Schools. Both the Kogarah and Miranda Schools served as the meeting place of the respective municipal councils until their council chambers were built. Additionally, the Kogarah School premises served as the home for the District Court until a local courthouse could be built. Moreover, until the local town hall was completed, all the major local civic functions were usually held in the School's main hall. Of course, until other halls were built, all the important local public meetings were held in the School's main hall. Often members of parliament maintained their electorate office on the School's premises.

Patriotism

During both World Wars, the Schools became a focus for and important centres of wartime activities and patriotic celebrations. Soldiers were farewelled on going overseas and welcomed home again. Fundraising fetes, dances, billiard tournaments, housie games, and concerts were organised. Civil defence groups met and drilled. Groups of patriotic citizens met most days to knit socks and sweaters, to knot camouflage netting, or to pack comfort parcels. Even in peacetime, patriotism was a valued part of the Schools' activities. An old timer recalling his school days remembered that each year on Empire day (24 May), the whole School would march over to the School of Arts and take part in a ceremony that honoured the great men (sic) of the Empire (Larkin, 1998).

Emergency Relief

The Schools also played a significant role in other emergency situations. Often the School of Arts was the local centre of relief during the pneumonic influenza epidemic of 1919. The Schools have provided emergency accommodation and centres for relief during bushfires and floods. Many thousands of infants and school children were, post World War Two, immunised in the Schools' halls.

Billiards and Other Recreational Pursuits

Billiards played a major role in the lives of the Schools. Almost all had at least one table and some had as many as six. Social billiards and snooker were very popular male recreational activities. Moreover, there were quite extensive intra and inter School competitions and tournaments. The main role of the Literary Institutes Association of NSW, despite it name, seems to have been the overseeing of a huge inter-School billiards competition. Many observers

have condemned the role of billiards and other frivolous activities in the life of the Schools. This criticism has come from both the right (Munn & Pitt, 1935) and the left (Murray-Smith, 1966). But as Carruthers argued the recreational aspects of the Schools activities were very important. The Schools' billiards rooms, card, smoking and games rooms were some of the very few alcohol free zones where working men could meet and relax. And, of course, the income, so derived, allowed the other more "worthy" activities of the School to be funded.

Social Functions

In the main halls of the Schools were held all sorts of social functions, both public and private. There were concerts, recitals, balls, dances, fetes, bazaars, flower shows and art exhibitions for a range of public purposes. The Sutherland School of Arts, in the 1920s, held regular dances on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday every week of the year. The Schools' halls were always in demand for private functions and parties. Wedding receptions, engagement, twenty-first, golden wedding, retirement, and other parties were happy events, which made the School's rafters ring.

Schools of Arts: The Beginning of The End?

The suburban School of Arts had developed as a comprehensive provider of educational, social, cultural, and recreational services to its local community. But, by the middle of the twentieth century, these local communities and the wider Australian society had changed substantially. Many of these changes had been detrimental to the continued good health of the local Schools of Arts

- The Great Depression, at first, had reduced and, then, ended the annual State government grants that had assisted with the Schools' activities.
- The Second World War had forced Australian society to revisit its priorities and there was a much welcomed post war expansion of formal educational opportunities for all Australians, including adults.
- New entertainment media, at first, the movies, then, radio and, finally, television captured the recreational interests of many people.
- As local populations grew, a varied range of more specialised community services and facilities were established. Churches and their associated halls were built, dance halls opened, commercial cinemas began operation, lodge halls were erected, and local clubs acquired their own premises.
- The motor car and the expansion of the new non railway / tramway suburbs lead to the development of a more mobile, more home oriented, and less tied to the immediate local community suburban population.
- The State government in 1944 passed the NSW Public Libraries Act. Now, Municipal Councils were expected to establish and operate free public libraries. Once established these new modern public libraries with their up to date collections and trained Staffs would soon make the older, much more limited collections of the Schools' subscription libraries largely redundant.
- As licensed clubs spread across the community fuelled by the then untaxed poker machine income, the Schools' last bastion, the income from their billiards rooms fell dramatically. In the new licensed clubs not only could you play billiards at no cost but you could get a cheap meal and have a beer at the same time.

So, by the late 1950s, the day of the suburban School of Arts seemed to have been done. Their earlier comprehensive multipurpose functions had been taken over by a range of more specialised bodies. Now, the Schools' trustees had to look for a way ahead into the second half of the twentieth century. And while in this area a good number managed to survive and to continue to operate as independent Schools of Arts right up to the present day, the premises of quite a few Schools were voluntarily transferred to their local Municipal Council and continue to serve a public purpose under those auspices, others passed into private ownership, and some unfortunately were demolished.

Conclusions

Later forms of Australian adult education, it can be argued, all built upon the foundations laid by the multipurpose School of Arts (Whitelock, 1974). To take only the most obvious of cases, the origins of liberal adult education, technical and vocational education, the local public library, the community or neighbourhood centre, and the local multipurpose recreational facility can all be found in the School of Arts (Candy, 1994). While they may not have achieved their founding goal of providing comprehensive scientific and technological education for the artisan class, they did in the suburbs of Sydney provide important educational, social, civic, and recreational services to their local communities. Perhaps most importantly, as the testimony of their users shows, was the role that the Schools played in the lives of thousands of Australians. The warm tributes that many older Australians pay to their personal experiences with their local School of Arts show that it was those local Schools that made the concept of lifelong learning accessible to so many adults.

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